

Beyond tragedy: Thucydides and the Sicilian Expedition

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The Athenian expedition to Sicily is, in its description by Thucydides, memorable as a complete catastrophe. Less obvious is the way in which he makes its outcome seem more gloomy even than Athenian tragedy.

The Victorian poet, Matthew Arnold, listening to the sound of the sea, remembered that:

*Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it
brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb
and flow
Of human misery;*

For us, continues the poem ('Dover Beach'), the sound evokes rather the 'long melancholy withdrawing roar' of the Sea of Faith that once lay around the earth. Here we now are, without god,

*as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of
struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash
by night.*

With this melancholy simile Arnold surely had somewhere in his mind Thucydides' account of the battle on Epipolae (7.43-4).

Thucydides' account of the night battle on Epipolae, the plateau overlooking the city of Syracuse in Sicily, is one of the most evocative and poignant battle narratives in his *Histories*. Because there was bright moonlight, says Thucydides, the combatants could see the forms of bodies but could not be sure whether they were friend or enemy. The noise made it hard to distinguish anything. In the general confusion the Athenians mistakenly fought each other, were routed by the Syracusans, and many of them died by throwing themselves down the cliffs. Arnold's use of this as an image for our world deserted by faith is especially apposite, given that in the world described by Thucydides the gods do not intervene. The comprehensive chaos of the battle coheres somehow with a godless world.

Thucydides' tragic tale

Arnold's explicit mention of Sophocles invites us to think of his poem in tragic terms, which may also be helpful in our reading of Thucydides. One conception of tragedy is that, in its purest form, tragedy embodies the truth that 'it is best not to be born, next best to die young': for instance, the ending of Euripides' *Bacchae* 'presses towards total despair' in Steiner's words. Compare the final words of Thucydides Book Seven, of the Athenians:

Defeated in every respect completely, everything they suffered was on a large scale, their destruction was – as the saying goes – total, of infantry, ships, and everything else, and out of many only a few returned home.

This seems tragic, at least in our broad sense of 'tragic'. More specifically, this disaster is the culmination of a pattern of arrogance and delusion that occurs also in Attic tragedy. The Athenians, carried away by success, were deluded into trying to conquer Sicily and so came to grief. Consider also the reversal of intention that is typical of tragedy and emphasized by Thucydides (75):

Having come to enslave others, they were departing in fear of being themselves enslaved; instead of the prayer and païans with which they sailed out, it was now with ominous utterances of the opposite kind that they were setting off to return.

Even the juxtaposition of utterances opposed in mood is a frequent feature of tragedy. In Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, for instance, the chorus pray 'instead of laments at the tomb, let a paian in the palace bring in the welcome newly-mixed wine'.

There are many such similarities. It would after all be surprising if the Athenian Thucydides' narrative did not share features with the dominant poetic genre of Athens. All the more intriguing therefore – I suggest – are the enormous

differences, oppositions even, between Thucydides and tragedy.

The non-tragic nature of Thucydides' world: no gods, no family, no resolution

The passage of Sophocles which Matthew Arnold had in mind is probably the one from the *Antigone* that compares the ancient sufferings of the Theban royal house to the storm-driven swell of the sea. Now in this passage it is 'one of the gods' that is destroying the family, and there follows in quick succession mention of the gods below, the Fury, and the power of Zeus. In tragedy gods are – for good or bad – everywhere. But in the world as described by Thucydides they do not intervene. Secondly, the 'turbid ebb and flow of human misery' supposedly brought into the mind of Sophocles by the sea was not in fact the general misery of humankind. It was the misery of the notorious ruling family of Thebes. He uses the same image again in the *Oedipus at Colonus* of Oedipus, and in the *Women of Trachis* of Herakles – a passage to which I will return. Most surviving tragedies focus on family conflict that is self-destructive and sometimes polluting. This is in sharp contrast to Homer, and in even sharper contrast to Thucydides, whose narrative with very few exceptions avoids the family altogether. Then there is a third significant difference between Thucydides and tragedy. In tragedy the polis – with chorus – survives, and often benefits from the founding of a cult or of some other institution. It is only barbarian communities that experience unresolved suffering (Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Aeschylus' *Persians*). When the tragedian Phrynichus dramatized the destruction of a Greek city (contemporary Miletos), he was fined. The idea of George Steiner that the civic performance of tragedy enacts total despair, just for the sake of it, is the fantasy of a socially disengaged twentieth-century intellectual.

No hope for the polis

It is in Thucydides rather that Greek communities are destroyed, and this may

sometimes contribute to a sense of total despair that, although we may think of it as 'tragic', nevertheless sharply distinguishes Thucydides from Attic tragedy. Inserted into the Sicilian narrative is the spectacle of the destruction of a Greek community, the general massacre of the inhabitants of the town of Mykalessos in Boeotia (29). And as things deteriorate for the Athenians around Syracuse, the destruction even of Athens itself becomes imaginable.

'It is men that are a *polis*', the general Nikias tells his men (77), and Thucydides compares their retreat to a large *polis* besieged into surrender (75). Its eventual destruction worsens a dire situation in Attica, for Athens is itself simultaneously being besieged. 'Who would have believed it?', says Thucydides (64) of the Athenians' ambition that led them to besiege a mighty city in Sicily while themselves simultaneously being besieged at home. Nikias predicts that defeat in Sicily will cause the downfall of Athens. We are reminded of the self-destructive excess of the tragic 'tyrants' (*turannoi*), and that Perikles had warned the Athenians 'you hold your empire like a tyranny' (3.37). The emphatic final words (quoted above) of the Sicilian narrative seem to doom Athens.

Thucydides book seven: a story of death, despair, and devastation

And so three fundamental features of Attic tragedy are absent from Thucydides: family conflict, active gods, and the ultimate security of the *polis*. The first is horrific, but confined to *turannoi*, and the second and third are reassuring. I conclude with examples from book seven of the despair produced by negation (whether deliberate or not) of the reassurance provided by tragedy.

As the expedition is about to withdraw from Syracuse to safety, there occurs an eclipse of the moon (50). Nikias, being 'excessively given to divination and such-like', insists on staying put for the twenty-seven days prescribed by the seers (*manteis*). The delay proves fatal. By contrast, the tragic *turannoi* of Thebes – Oedipus, Kreon, and Pentheus – each come into conflict with the *mantis* Teiresias, who is proved right, with disastrous consequences for the *turannos*. Whereas the tragic *turannos* disrespects gods who exist, Nikias excessively respects gods who do not exist. The latter is far more disconcerting than the former. The Athenians are consequently trapped, and have to fight in the great harbour. As the battle begins, Nikias urges on the sailors (69) in terms reminiscent of the cry that – in Aeschylus' narrative in *Persians* – went up among the advancing Greek ships that won the battle of Salamis. But

the Athenians lose, and have to retreat by land. Nikias comforts the despairing troops: our enemies have had enough good fortune, he says, and if the gods were resentful at our expedition, we have already been punished enough (77). This faith in a divinely ensured balance of reversing fortune is expressed also in tragedy, for instance in the choral ode mentioned above from Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. But whereas in Sophocles the principle is fulfilled by the action, the expedition suffers unlimited and irreversible destruction, and Nikias himself is captured and executed. Thucydides comments that of all the Greeks of his time Nikias least deserved such a wretched fate, since he had ordered his whole life in accordance with virtue (86). Such extreme undeservedness may seem to us 'tragic', but is not what we find in Athenian tragedy. And indeed Aristotle in the *Poetics* recommends that the tragedian should not show good men passing from prosperity to misery, as this is neither fearful nor pitiable but disgusting.

In tragedy the individuals are frequently isolated, often by intra-familial violence, but the communality of chorus and *polis* survives. In Thucydides, by contrast, destruction occurs to community as well as individual (Nikias), and moreover each member of the community is isolated – even from his own family. When the expedition retreats by land, the sick and wounded are left behind, despite their pleas to each individual comrade or relative (75). In the final massacre, the retreating Athenians rush into the river Assinaros. Each man wants to cross first. They tread each other down, and even fight each other to drink the muddy bloody water, as they are massacred by the enemy (84).

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